



<http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>

Fox-hunting in the shires / by T.F. Dale ; Illustrated from photographs by R.B. Lodge and others.

London :G. Richards,1903.

<http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/33019>

Item: <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/77431>

Page(s): Page 144, Text, Page 145, Page 146, Page 147, Page 148, Page 149, Page 150, Page 151, Page 152

Contributed by: Webster Family Library of Veterinary Medicine (archive.org)
Sponsored by: Tufts University

This page intentionally left blank.

of Melton to the covert side when hunting in their Leicestershire country. Of the Lincolnshire side of the Belvoir I have already written when describing the sport open to visitors from Grantham.

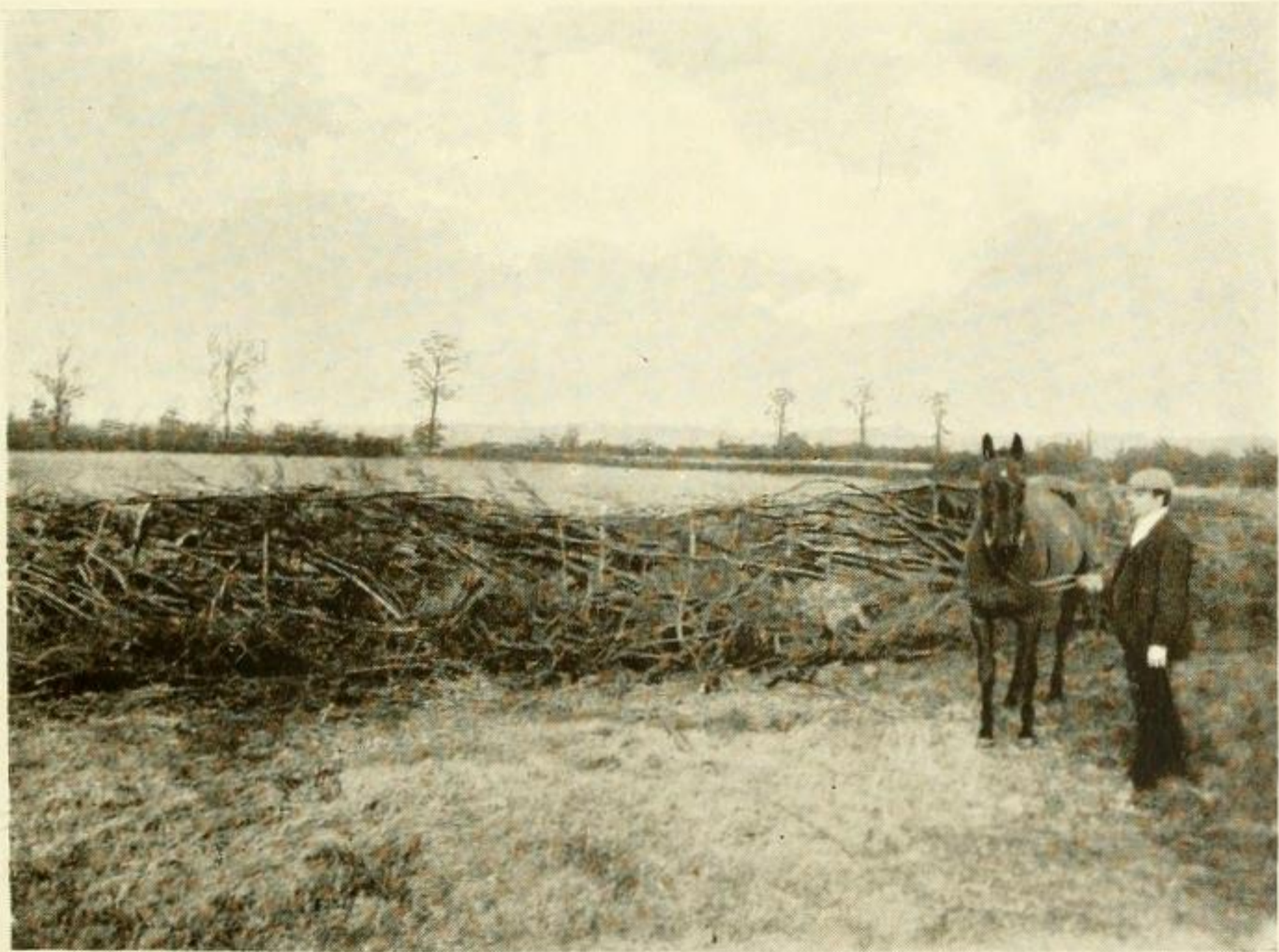
In speaking of this hunt, then, it must not be forgotten that it still is a great county hunt, affording sport to the squires and farmers of the district, the fathers and forefathers of many of whom have supported the hunt, preserved foxes and ridden after the hounds for as long a time as the Manners family have kept the pack. Times have altered in the Belvoir country as elsewhere, and it is now a subscription hunt. Still, owing to the unrivalled pack which the Duke of Rutland lends freely to the country, and to the kennels and many splendid coverts provided by him, the connection between the hunt and Belvoir Castle is in no way severed, the present Duke being not less interested than his predecessors in the fame of the hounds which still depend upon his support and influence in so many ways.

IV. MR. FERNIE'S HUNT

From the hunts round Melton we pass to those for which Market Harborough is the centre, and the chief of these is the Billesdon Hunt, better known to its members and to the world generally as *Mr. Fernie's*. This hunt was formed out of the southern portion of the Quorn, and in old books, before the division, it is always described as the Harborough country, and was by many people considered the cream of the Quorn Hunt. Mr. Meynell stayed at Langton Hall, and the hounds were kennelled at Great Bowden



VIEW FROM JOHN BALL



A CUT AND LAID FENCE IN HIGH LEICESTERSHIRE.

Inn when this part of the Quorn country was to be hunted. In his time there were not a great many foxes, and most of the coverts which we draw to-day were not planted.

The country was more open than now, and it is said that from Glooston Wood to Skeffington there was no covert and scarcely a tree. But by the time Mr. Assheton Smith was Master of the Quorn (1806-17), enclosures, draining and the planting of artificial coverts had gone on apace and the country was already much in favour with the hard riders. We have seen how Mr. Vickerman looked on it as the best part of Leicestershire when he visited Melton. Yet the hilly nature of the ground and the severity of its fences caused many Meltonians then, as now, to avoid it and to seek their Thursday's sport in the Market Overton district of the Cottesmore Hunt. But Mr. Smith and Mr. Osbaldeston both liked it, and the names of its historic coverts recur often in the pages of the *Sporting Magazine*. One disadvantage this part of the Quorn always laboured under, in that it was a long way from Melton and it was necessary for hounds and servants to lie out the night before hunting, on account of the distance from the headquarters of the hunt at Quorn.

It was in Sir Richard Sutton's mastership that the division first began. Mr. Richard Sutton (1885) hunted the country from Billesdon, where he built kennels, and to this day the members of the hunt have B.H. on their buttons. In the days of Lord Stamford the division became definite, and ever since the time when Mr. Tailby first became master (1856) the Billesdon Hunt has been practically a separate institution. There was an idea of reuniting to the Quorn when Mr. Tailby resigned in 1878, and it was

understood that Mr. Coupland, at that time Master of the Quorn, desired to reclaim the Harborough country. But landowners, farmers and subscribers had tasted the advantages of autonomy and were in no way inclined to agree to reunion. The good town of Market Harborough, which, during Mr. Tailby's mastership, rivalled Melton itself, threw all its influence into the scale for separation, and the Billesdon is now as firmly established in the loyalty of its members as any hunt in England.

Since the days of Mr. Tailby the limits of the country have been much narrowed and reduced. It so happened that the beginning of Mr. Tailby's mastership coincided with the resignation by Lord Lonsdale of the mastership of the Cottesmore, and Sir John Trollope (1855), who had stepped into the breach with a view of keeping that hunt going, was unable to undertake so wide an extent of country. Mr. Tailby therefore received the loan of the Leicestershire woodlands of the Cottesmore and some of the choicest coverts of that hunt, having the right to draw the Punch Bowl, Ranksborough and other places in the old and present Cottesmore country. Thus for many seasons Mr. Tailby hunted the best four-day-a-week country that has ever been known. It is a matter of common knowledge that he showed extraordinary sport and the Tailby Thursdays were famous. Quarters at Market Harborough went to a premium. All the hardest riding men flocked to the country.

Such were Mr. J. H. Douglass, still the secretary of the hunt and one of the best of the heavy weights, the Messrs. Murrietta, who were pioneers of polo, the Goslings, who lived at Harborough, Mr. Alan Pennington, who has for many years now hunted with the Quorn, "Timber" Powell, so called from his liking

for that kind of fence, the late Lord Hopetoun, who lived at Papillon's Hall, Captain Whitmore, of Gumley Hall, whose team of greys was a feature of the coaching meets at The Magazine in Hyde Park in bygone days, Major Bethune of Burton Overy, Colonel Baillie of Illston, Mr. Hay of Great Bowden, and last but not least, Mr. Tailby of Skeffington, a very hard man, who still rides to hounds and can take a fence and risk a fall with many a younger man. He set the example of riding hard, and they still show the gate which he attempted, took a severe fall, picked himself up and went on after his hounds. Shortly afterwards the hounds ran back over the same line when the Master on the same horse charged the same gate as gaily as before and this time cleared it without a fall, as he deserved to do.

The same cheery friendly spirit which marked the hunt in those days prevails still, and the Billesdon remains a hunt neither spoilt by wealth nor corrupted by fashion. Nowhere indeed so much as here does the gallant old Leicestershire spirit survive. There were fewer ladies hunting then than now, but still this hunt has never failed to attract those who loved to be with hounds when they run, such as Mrs. Arthur of Desborough, the late Mrs. Douglass and others who, being still with us, shall not be named here, but who are quite as keen, as gallant, and as brave as those who went before them. The time, however, of which I have spoken was too good to last, and when the late Lord Lonsdale took the mastership of the Cottesmore he not unnaturally reclaimed this attractive side of his country, which had the effect not only of curtailing the Billesdon country but deprived the hunt of practically all its woodlands. For a time Mr. Tailby hunted the reduced country two days a week, but in 1878 he

resigned after a mastership which will be remembered as long as hunting continues in the Midlands.

Then came Sir Bache Cunard of Nevill Holt, and his mastership marks an important era in the history of the hunt, for from his first year practically dates its existence as a separate and independent body. Sir Bache Cunard hunted two days a week, with an occasional bye. This brings us to the reign of the present Master, Mr. Fernie, and since he took the country the sport has been better and the wire less than before. In nine years of mastership Mr. Fernie has received an increasing support from farmers and landowners, and many people have settled within the limits of the hunt for the sake of the hunting and to share the privilege of riding over the best grass country in England. The whole district has benefited in consequence. The smallest villages have their tenants for the hunting season, and Market Harborough has, as we have seen, visitors who return there every year. But the surest sign of the prosperity of the hunt is to be found in the preservation of foxes, and there can be no better instance of the growth of good feeling in this respect than the history of this small piece of country, but twenty miles by fifteen miles in extent. In 1800 it was hunted for only a part of the season; later on, it had one day a week, and Mr. Tailby found it hardly sufficient for two days; and now it is hunted seven days a fortnight, with very frequent bye-days, and such a thing as a blank day is unknown. The whole of the old undivided Quorn country, from the borders of Nottinghamshire to the boundary of Northants, supplied foxes for four or five days in a week; now hounds are often advertised for nine places within the same limits during each week from November to April.

In spite of its advantages, however, Mr. Fernie's fixtures are not overcrowded, for the truth is that to ride to hounds fairly straight is beyond the power of all save a few. Those who would do so must have nerve unshaken and big bold blood horses, for the fences are serious obstacles, and it might well happen that during a run many, possibly most, of the fences will be such that they can just be jumped and no more. This is not only a test of nerve in the rider but of staying power in the horse, since big fences take more out of them than galloping. Inasmuch, then, as the reason for choosing such a country is that you wish to ride hard (for, as I have previously pointed out, if you do not desire this there are other countries than Leicestershire which would suit you better), two horses a day are a necessity or you must make up your mind to forego a great deal of the best sport. There are seasons (1901-2 was one) during which hounds will often run better in the evening than in the morning, and it is certain that there are many days in each season when they will do so. But before these afternoon runs begin the man with one horse ought to be well on his way home.

There is, however, one consideration on the other side of the account. I know no country where horses come again so quickly as they do here, and I think the percentage of injuries to horses is small. They are always galloping on sound turf which, if sometimes hard, is nearly always springy and elastic. Thus, the strains which happen in deep and sticky ground are avoided. I think, too, that while it is always a luxury to have a horse a stone over one's riding weight, yet that a lighter horse can be more safely ridden in this country than elsewhere. Horses come out more often, and if two horses a day are provided, there is

no reason why they should not, if sound and fairly stout in constitution, be hunted twice in the week. Indeed, condition is so important a matter in these grass countries that if a horse is able to come out often he will be all the better and pleasanter to ride. Speaking of the hard work done by the hunt horses in his earlier days, Frank Gillard says, "It is astonishing what a well-bred one can do, and we liked it better" (*i.e.* riding horses in hard work) "than did Lord Henry Bentinck's servants who were over-horsed."

It is well perhaps for men of moderate means who may be contemplating a season on the grass to be reminded that the big studs we read of are the exception, since wealthy men are comparatively few. Indeed, even rich men do not only spend their money on horse flesh. Probably from four to six horses and a hack is the average number in most stables. If, once more, I may refer to "Market Harborough," we shall find that Mr. Sawyer saw much sport with four and a horse of all work. But to enjoy hunting in Mr. Fernie's country a man must, as I have said, come prepared to ride and he cannot be too well mounted. The country is undulating, with ascents often steep; therefore a horse must be stout; he must have good shoulders to gallop down hill; he must go fast or he will be left behind or become so blown that he will fall; he must be fairly handy and temperate, because there are times when the rider will have to open gates or take his turn at a gap. Then the horse should be a bold clean fencer, able to crash through a thick hedge, to clear a stout top binder, to gallop over his fences at a fair pace or to pull back to a trot, to hop over a stout rail in a corner, or a High Leicestershire stile which is simply four rails stout and high, with a footboard to help the pedestrian.

I could find two of these within half a mile of the place where these lines are being written which would tax a horse good at timber, and they are the only possible way from one field to another.

You will say it is not easy to buy such a horse. True; but the nearer you can obtain him to this standard the more fun you will have, and in Mr. Fernie's country there is no doubt that you would be better off with two such horses than with four inferior ones. When Nimrod wanted to tell of a typical ride over Leicestershire, he chose the line from Norton Gorse to Tilton Wood, as those may read who will in the thrilling story of the death of Edwin in the "Hunting Reminiscences."

Nor would any account of the country be complete without writing of its brooks, though they are to be forded and are well supplied with bridges. The Norton brook and Stonton brook are perhaps quite as often jumped on paper as in real life. This is as well, for they are ragged in their banks and generally awkward places, though they can be avoided without undue shirking. Nevertheless they do come in the line, and only in this last season six of the field flew Norton brook, led by the Master and the huntsman. Now if a friend were to ask me what was the best class of horse for High Leicestershire, I should advise him to try to keep in his mind the hunt horses, for they are not only apt to go, but they are true in type and make to the best class of grass country hunter. There are perhaps thirty of them in the stables at Medbourne, and there are few men who have not wished that they could be one of Mr. Fernie's hunt servants for the day.

Though a small country, Mr. Fernie's is rather notable for the number of huntsmen it has trained.

Mr. C. M'Neill, the Master of the North Cotswold, and Mr. Carnaby Foster, of the Ledbury, have both taken a first-class as huntsmen. Mr. C. Mills, too, is deputy-master of the Worcestershire. Then Kinch, a first whipper-in, at one time hunted the Atherstone, and of Thatcher of the Cottesmore every one has heard. All of these came out of the Billesdon country, where they were well known as hard and keen riders over the country and as careful students of the work of hounds.

Mr. Fernie's country lies entirely in Leicestershire. The kennels are at Medbourne, a pretty village on the Welland, but in the extreme corner of the county and of the hunt. They have about sixty couple of hounds in kennels, a charming pack with the true make, the good loins, the hocks near the ground and the beautiful necks and shoulders which enable them to gallop all day without tiring up and down the hills of their country, and to travel at a pace which is surpassed by no other pack of our time.

V. THE PYTCHLEY

Taking the packs in order from a centre, the pack next of importance to Market Harborough visitors is the famous Pytchley Hunt. I have dwelt on its history because, unlike the Quorn and the Belvoir, this hunt has not yet found its systematic historian. There is a pleasant book written by Mr. Nethercote which rather contains *Memoirs pour servir* than a complete account of the Hunt. Indeed, the mastership of Mr. Naylor is scarcely noted in its pages, but luckily our old friend *Baily's Magazine* has filled the gap